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ANIMALS GOOD FOR HEALING:  
ON EXPERIENCES WITH FOLK HEALERS  
IN INNER MONGOLIA (CHINA)

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THE BEGINNING: SOME SURPRISES

The opportunity for fieldwork with shamans in northeastern Inner Mongolia, together with experienced colleagues, came as a windfall, causing me contradictory feelings. On the one hand it was a pleasant surprise, because it promised the fulfillment of a dream I had long nurtured. On the other hand, however, it made me painfully aware of the limits for my work. Limits in time, because I could not use more than a few weeks each year, and limits in communication, because I lacked practically any knowledge of Chinese or Mongolian. I could not change the problem of limited time, but I was fortunate enough to find a good interpreter. His help went a long way to solve at least part of my linguistic problem. In addition, the fact that he was a Mongol proved instrumental in opening many doors to us. Furthermore, he had a great number of friends and acquaintances in the area, something that turned out to be an invaluable asset, because these people gracefully agreed to support us in many ways and at every stage of my fieldwork. Nevertheless, my linguistic handicap was not completely overcome. For that reason, explanations I can offer for actions I have observed may often remain unsatisfactory. However, I will make an effort to describe as truthfully as possible what I have observed in the hope of making up at least in part for my lacunae.

On my first visit to the area in the year 2000, the Chinese colleague in our research group offered to accompany me. From his earlier visits, he was already familiar with several shamans or healers in the area of our fieldwork, and agreed to introduce me to a few of them. One was a woman healer at whose house we arrived at about noon on a warm September day. Almost immediately after our arrival, she invited us, together with some friends of hers, for lunch in a small restaurant in the village, saying "Let's have some mutton!" While we

were waiting for the meat to appear, my colleague and the woman were engaged in casual conversation and exchanged memories of earlier visits. Suddenly, the woman looked intensely into my colleague's face saying, as he told me later: "Your heart is not well. Your body is not in good form, because there is too much *qì* in your stomach." Her behavior and remark surprised me and made me wonder how she could possibly know this. When, a few moments later, after the meat had been served, the woman picked up a thigh from the pile of meat on the plate and, while she swung it in circles in front of our faces, she accompanied her movements with a song. Then she explained what all of this meant. It was a ritual, she said, she performs for a child whose soul had gone astray, in order to have the soul return. After the simple rite, in order to complete it, the child had to eat the meat, but nobody else was allowed to eat from that piece. After our meal, the woman took us to the family, for whose little boy she had recently performed the rite. The boy was running around in the room, as any healthy child would do, and the expression on the face of the woman who had brought us to the family left no doubt that she was proud of her success in helping the child.

This unexpected short performance made me aware that mutton was not only an important part of the Mongol diet, but that it also has a significant role to play in healing and in the recovering of an afflicted person's health. The woman used a piece of already cooked meat to demonstrate how she cured the boy, but I am not sure whether she had done it the same way when she actually performed the rite for the boy. At the time when I witnessed her demonstration at our table, I just assumed that she had actually used cooked meat in curing the boy and so did not inquire whether this was really the case or whether she rather might have used raw meat. The question of what kind of meat had been used occurred to me only later after I had heard more about the curing by the means of applying animal meat, because in these cases it was stressed that the meat (or hide) of the animal used should still be warm and, therefore, raw. In any case, the demonstration of that day was most intriguing to me and aroused a strong wish to be one day in a position to attend a healing rite in which the use of an animal's meat was crucial. That day eventually

presented itself, again unexpectedly, but by that time several years had passed since the first encounter just mentioned. In the meantime, I had the opportunity to become quite well acquainted with several of these healers who call themselves, or are called by their clients, *bariyaqi*.

Although I will have more to say about what a *bariyaqi* is, suffice it for the moment to say that he or she is a 'folk healer,' a person who is sought after for help in curing illnesses or wounds, but who did not undergo formal medical training in order to qualify for the job. The woman mentioned above says of herself that she is a *bariyaqi* and I will call her S *bariyaqi*. She is a middle-aged woman with an established reputation as a successful *bariyaqi*. For that reason, she is visited daily by numerous people seeking her help. One day, she told me the story of one of her cases, which I had stumbled on by accident on a visit to her house. On that visit I found a man doing all kinds of services and chores around the house. When I asked him who he was, he said that he was the younger brother of S *bariyaqi*. His answer puzzled me because S *bariyaqi* had told me on an earlier visit that she had no brothers. To solve my puzzle, the man told me story of why he became the 'younger brother' of the *bariyaqi*.

His story goes like this. His son, a high school student, had been badly injured in a traffic accident and had to be hospitalized for months. When he was finally discharged, he was still suffering from terrible headaches, but the doctors told him there was nothing more they could do for him. For the boy, this meant that he could never think of returning to school. But his father did not give in, and desperately tried to find a way to help his son. In this situation, he brought the boy to S *bariyaqi* and told her what had happened. She took the boy into her house for twenty-one days and treated him daily, massaging his head and blowing strong spirits on it. At the end of this period the boy was completely relieved from the headaches. "Now he goes to school again, like all the other students," said S *bariyaqi* in concluding her story. The boy's father, out of gratitude for her having restored his son's health, decided to support her in any way he could, and for that reason became her 'younger brother.'

Here I want to draw attention to a few points in this story that I think are noteworthy. The first is that the *bariyaqi* had come

on the scene at the moment when biomedicine declared it had reached its limits. The second point is that the *bariyaqi* used only readily available ordinary means in applying her cure: a fixed period of twenty-one days during which she used no other means but her hands for the massage and her mouth to blow the spirits on the boy's head. And finally, last but not least, is that the boy's father had full confidence in the *bariyaqi*'s healing charisma, although there was no official acknowledgement. The only sign that would lead people to her house was a white cross, painted on the exterior wall. But even that would not really indicate who and what she was. In order to understand the sign, one needed to know beforehand what kind of person lived in that house. Incidentally, when my colleague and I were looking for her house, we did not even notice the sign.

Among the friends of my translator there was also a Mongol doctor who had an office in the Mongol Hospital of Hailar. One day, we visited him there, and when we stepped into the entrance hall, I was surprised to find three different windows there, each one offering access to a different kind of medicine, Western biomedicine, Chinese traditional medicine, and Mongol medicine. The doctor we were about to visit had studied Mongol medicine and had his office in the hospital's section for Mongol medicine. This hospital appeared to be a demonstration of the types of medicine that are officially acknowledged by the Administration of Inner Mongolia. However, there was no place for a *bariyaqi* in this system. The *bariyaqi* functions outside the official system, yet under certain circumstances, like those of the boy mentioned in the story above, the system admits a possibility for a *bariyaqi* to step in. This can happen when the system's professionals have reached the limits of their wisdom. A doctor may not really believe in the healing ability of a *bariyaqi*, but under such circumstances he nevertheless lets the patient try a last option, or he may in fact acknowledge a *bariyaqi*'s ability to offer the patient a real chance for recovery where his own expertise has reached its limits. The latter is the case in the situation I will now describe.

## USING A SHEEP'S BODY PARTS FOR HEALING

Ever since the day when I got word for the first time about a well-known and very successful female *bariyaqi*, I was looking forward to an opportunity to encounter her. She was said to use the same method as other *bariyaqi*, namely, to knead the afflicted part of a patient's body and blow alcohol onto it. But, the main reason for her success was seen in a method particular only to her: curing by licking the sick spot on a patient's body.

In the course of time, I had opportunities to meet with and observe several *bariyaqi*, but what I had been told about this particular one made me truly curious. On a fine day in the summer of 2005, a chance to meet her presented itself, and my translator, who knew her already from earlier meetings, took me to her house. When we arrived, she already had several clients waiting for their turn to be treated. She nonetheless took time out of her evidently busy schedule to talk to us. Because of what I had already heard about her, I began by asking the obvious question of how she went about curing patients. She then explained that she blows alcohol on the sick area of a client's body and that she always licks the area, adding that this was really the most important action in her cure, an action she alone performed. Further, she said that she could feel in her own body where a client was suffering. For that reason, she felt very tired at the end of a day, after caring for many clients.

Her friendly openness finally encouraged me to ask a question about another method that had been mentioned to me repeatedly by other *bariyaqi*, but it seemed too unusual and rare to me to hope for an explanation, let alone a chance to observe it. Nevertheless, on that day I decided to try my luck. What I had in mind was the method of using parts of a sheep's body to heal a human patient. She began by explaining what had to be done in such a case and then announced unexpectedly that she had actually been asked to do just such a kind of healing. It would take place a few days later. To my surprise, she even offered to take us – my translator and me – along and let us witness the procedure.

Once the date was set, we received notice on an early morning and proceeded to the house of the *bariyaqi*, whom from

now on I will call Y *bariyaqi*. At her house, we joined her in the car that was already waiting to bring all of us to the village of the patient and his family. The patient was a high school student suffering from severe headaches, repeatedly losing conscience and falling to the ground. The village doctor had examined the boy and had tried every means available to him in order to help him, yet his efforts were to no avail. In this situation he consulted with Y *bariyaqi*, who was an acquaintance of his, and then decided to entrust her with the performing of a healing rite for the boy for which she would use parts of a sheep's body.

After a ride of about an hour and a half, we arrived at the patient's house in the late morning, at around ten thirty. Immediately after arriving, Y *bariyaqi* entered the house and, after a few simple greetings, proceeded directly to a room adjacent to the house entrance. In that room the body of a sheep was lying on a sheet. The sheep had already been killed and its skinning was almost completed, but the butchering had not yet started (Figure 1).

The man charged with the skinning and dissecting of the sheep must be a person well versed in these activities, because they must be done with great circumspection and accuracy. Just at the moment Y *bariyaqi* entered the room he took out the bladder from the sheep's body. He handed it to her right away. Holding the warm bladder in her hands, the *bariyaqi* hurried to an adjacent room. There a young girl, probably a third or fourth grader, was lying on her bed. The *bariyaqi* put the bladder quickly upon the girl's private parts and fixed it so that it could not fall off. She asked the girl to keep resting quietly for about an hour. Then she returned to the room where the butchering of the sheep was making progress. She explained her action by saying that she used the bladder to cure the girl who, because of a weakness of her urinary bladder, was suffering from wetting her pants. The simple action was not related to the curing that the *bariyaqi* had been called for. But taken together with some similar treatments performed after the main curing, it showed that the killing of a sheep enabled the *bariyaqi* to use many other parts, in order to treat various diseases apart from the one that was to be the main focus of her action. The sheep's bladder was not needed for what Y *bariyaqi* was to do later, and so she did not return to the

girl's room to check on the result of this treatment. But about an hour later I noticed how the girl was already playing with her friends in front of the house. By that time the *baryiaqi* had turned to attend the boy.

Figure 1. Skinning the sheep.<sup>1</sup>



In the room where the sheep was being butchered, its spleen (*delu*) and the two kidneys were now removed. *Y baryiaqi* took the kidneys and knotted a thin thread around their openings in order to close them tightly so that their *qì* would not escape (Figure 2).

Then she put the kidneys into cold water for about five minutes to cool them (Figure 3) and while they were cooling, *Y baryiaqi* took the spleen to bring it to the room where the boy was sitting on his bed. She attached the spleen to his forehead (Figure 4), covered it with a cloth and knotted the cloth at the back of his head so that the spleen could not move.

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<sup>1</sup> All photographs by the author, Hailar, 2005.

Figure 2. Binding the kidneys' openings.



Figure 3. Cooling of the two kidneys.



Figure 4. The spleen attached to the patient's forehead.



She said that, if a person was sick in their spleen, the sheep's spleen would be attached to the place of that person's spleen. However, in all other cases, the spleen is attached to the patient's forehead. If this is done, the patient does not suffer from headaches and he can be prevented from falling unconscious. The boy with the spleen fixed to his forehead had to now lie on his stomach on his bed. He also had to remove the clothes from the upper half of his body. When he was ready, Y *baryaqi* took the two cooled kidneys and placed each one on the place of the kidneys on the boy's lower back. She then wrapped the boy's body with a warm cloth, so the kidneys would remain fixed in their position (Figure 5). This was also done to protect the kidneys from the danger that bad air would damage them. The *baryaqi* instructed the boy to keep lying in this position for about two hours.

Figure 5. Fixing the kidneys with a cloth.



In the meantime, the dissecting of the sheep was proceeding smoothly and without problems. The women who took part in the work accepted the pieces of intestines one by one as they were taken out of the sheep's body, and put them into a container on the side. The sheep's blood was contained in the carcass until the women scooped it up with ladles and poured it into another container, taking care not to spill a single drop. Once the carcass was empty, the man in charge proceeded to cut out the spinal column. After that, a very difficult and precarious stage of the work began; the complete, undamaged spinal column needed to be removed. For this work, which needed not only highly skilled hands but also a great deal of patience and time, the village doctor lent a hand to the man who had cut out the backbone (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Extracting the spinal cord.



The tension under which the two men were working was palpable and could be felt also among the bystanders, the *bariyaqi* included, who eagerly awaited the successful conclusion of this difficult task.

Y *bariyaqi* took a seat for a little rest, while the two men were working. From that seat, she could observe the work of the men, but several people from among the bystanders took advantage of these moments to consult with her and ask for her advice.

When the time-consuming work had finally come to an end and the spinal cord was ready, Y *bariyaqi* took it and carried it to the room where the boy was lying. There she took off the cloth she had used to fasten the kidneys to the boy's back and then, on his bare back, she arranged the sheep's spinal cord on the boy's backbone so that it extended from the neck to the hips (Figure 7).

Y *bariyaqi* explained her actions, saying that by using the sheep's spinal cord in this manner the poison, meaning the illness, located in the patient's neck and/or hips, could be removed. On the spinal cord laid out in this way she then placed pieces of the sheep's meat, covering the cord completely, again from neck to hips (Figure 8).

She said that by placing the meat in this manner the poison (illness) in the patient's blood and body could be eliminated. Unfortunately, I did not think at the time to ask, if she had to use meat from certain parts of the sheep's body, but my impression was that any meat could have served the purpose.

After she had put the meat in place, Y *bariyaqi* took the cloth she had removed earlier from the kidneys to bind it again in the same way as before. Finally, she covered the boy's body with a blanket to keep it warm.

Figure 7. Attaching the spinal cord to the patient's back.



Figure 8. Covering the spinal cord with meat taken from the sheep.



While the *bariyaqi* was occupied placing the spinal cord, another difficult task had begun in the room with the sheep's body. The skin of the sheep's head had been removed in its entirety. The

difficult work to be done now was to take out the sheep's brain together with the containing membrane. This had to be done without causing any damage to the brain, the same way as the spinal cord had been removed. First, a piece of bone of about five or six square centimeters was cut out of the back of the skull so that the brain became visible (Figure 9).

Figure 9. The brain of the sheep has become visible.



Next, the brain had to be taken out undamaged through this hole. It was again a very time-consuming task, done patiently and adroitly by the doctor. When he could finally hold the brain in his hand, he quickly handed it over to the *bariyaqi* (Figure 10).

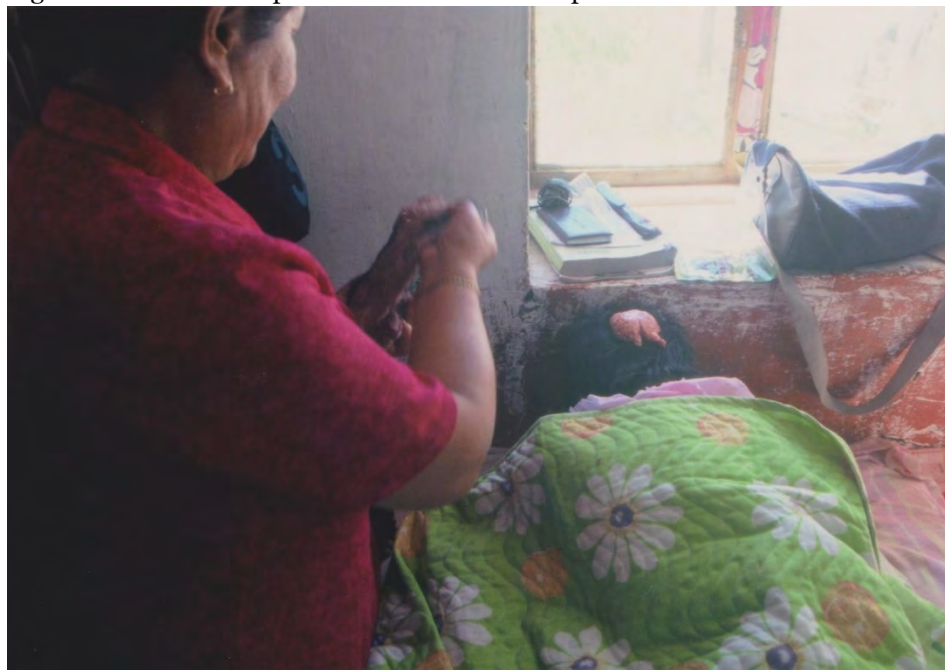
At this point in the curing process, Y *bariyaqi* explained certain important conditions. First, it was decisive that the brain together with its membrane was in no way damaged. Second, the sheep from which the brain was extracted had to be a healthy animal older than four years. Third, the person extracting the brain had to be a member of the patient's family. In the case described, the person who extracted the brain was the doctor, but he was also the sick boy's uncle. The *bariyaqi* pointed out that the brain could be used in the same way on a patient suffering from mental illness, but in any case the conditions mentioned needed to be observed exactly, or there was a serious danger that the patient would die.

Figure 10. The brain is shown to the *bariyaqi*.



Taking the brain, Y *bariyaqi* went again to the boy's room, where she removed the spleen from his forehead and the spinal cord and all the other meat from his back, putting it into a tray filled with water that was ready at the bedside. Then, she took the sheep's brain, attached it to the back of the boy's head, and covered the brain and the boy's head with the skin of the sheep's head, just as if covering it with a hat (Figure 11).

Figure 11. The brain is placed on the back of the patient's head.



In doing this, she made sure that the sheep's ears covered the boy's ears. The boy then had to lie again down on his stomach, but this time remained in that position for only about ten minutes, because the head of a patient under this kind of cover grows very hot, and therefore the cover should not be worn for a long time. The *bariyaqi* removed the brain after a few minutes and, while holding it in her hands, examined it (Figure 12). Then, she said that the brain had turned red, which was a sign that the boy's illness was not severe.

After she had removed the brain, she had the boy rest for a while. Meanwhile, she returned to the room where the sheep had been dissected, in order to take care of another person who was

waiting there. This was an old woman who complained of a problem with her eyes. Y *bariyaqi* took the sheep's two eyeballs and put them one by one on each of the woman's eyes. She then covered them with a cloth she bound to the woman's head, in order to keep the eyeballs in place (Figure 13).

Figure 12. The *bariyaqi* explains the brain's condition.



Figure 13. The *bariyaqi* applies the sheep's eyeballs to the eyes of a patient.



Before they could be used in this way, however, the eyeballs had to be put into water for about five minutes, the *bariyaqi* explained. After she had attached the eyeballs to the woman's eyes, she said that the woman should keep them in this way for some time, but as far as I could notice, she did not mention a definite length of time. After about ten minutes the old woman was already up again.

After this short interval, Y *bariyaqi* returned to the boy's room and picked up the spinal cord from the water where she had put it after she had removed it from the boy's back. She showed us the places where she said the spinal cord had changed its color (Figure 14).

The doctor, too, came to examine the cord. He and the *bariyaqi* shared comments about what they noticed, but unfortunately I was not able to understand their comments. I could only watch the expression on their faces, which appeared to me to be expressions of contentment and satisfaction, indicating that the procedure had been successful. However, it was still too early to make a final statement about the result because, as Y *bariyaqi* explained, ordinarily both the

spleen and the spinal cord had to be soaked in water for at least ten hours before it was possible to really judge by the change of their color whether the healing had been successful or not. Our time, however, did not allow us to wait for so many hours before we left.

Figure 14. The *bariyaqi* explains the condition of the spinal cord.



The inspection mentioned was not the end of the procedure. The boy was still lying on his bed as before, and appeared to be quite tired. After everything that had been put on his back had been removed, Y *baryaqi* began to rub his bare back with both hands, applying a paste made of wheat flour that had been roasted in oil (Figure 15).

Figure 15. The *baryaqi* rubs the patient's back with a paste of wheat flour.



This was, she explained, a measure to prevent bad air (the term used for translation was ‘wind,’ but I believe it should have been *qi*) from entering the boy's still-weak body. For the same reason, she also

rubbed the boy's back, head, and legs (Figure 16), and only after she had finished the rubbing did she tell the boy to put on his clothes.

Figure 16. The *bariyaqi* massages the patient's head.



When he was dressed again, he changed his position to sit cross-legged on his bed, and the women of the house came in to serve him food. There were several regulations about the kind of food that could be offered and about how it should be consumed. It had to be soup cooked with the sheep's meat, and the soup had to be eaten from a wooden bowl, with wooden chopsticks. The reason was again to help fend off the influence of bad air, which otherwise the boy's body was still judged to be too weak to do by itself.

By this time, more than three hours had passed since the healing procedure had started. There were several people waiting who wanted to consult Y *bariyaqi*. She listened and responded to a few of them, yet she had only a little time before her departure, because she knew that other clients were already waiting at her house for her to return. During the ride back to her house, Y *bariyaqi* mentioned in the car that she was satisfied with how the healing had

proceeded and that she was convinced that it had been successful. I did not intend to question her conviction, but I wished for some more concrete indication that the boy was really freed from his illness. Since there was no chance anymore to see the boy in person and observe his present state of health, the next possible source from where such an indication could come forth was Y *bariyaqi*. Therefore, we visited her again three or four days after the event. It gave me the possibility to ask her whether she had news about the boy's health. She said that she had gotten news and that the boy no longer had headaches, and did not fall unconscious anymore, and could now go to school every day with the other students.

She clearly appeared to be satisfied with the result of her efforts. I was also impressed by the fame and high degree of appreciation she enjoyed in the population for her healing power. I visited her on several occasions, and each time I was truly astonished by the many phone calls she received and the impressive number of clients that just dropped in or called, asking that she visit their house. Another reason was the matter-of-fact character of her actions. She had told me that she owes her success as a *bariyaqi* on one side to a charisma she had inherited from an ancestor, and on the other side to her own accumulated experience. This latter point was demonstrated to me during the healing process described when she said that she was the one who had determined how the procedure should be conducted in order to be successful. On other occasions, she insisted on saying that she did not rely on extraordinary or spiritual help of any kind, but that she had learned by experience what was successful and what not.

#### DISCUSSION: LOCATING Y BARIYAQI'S PRACTICE

In the course of my fieldwork I have become acquainted with five *bariyaqi*. Two of them were initiated by a shaman in an elaborate ritual, but the other three, among them Y *bariyaqi*, had not undergone any such ritual. They claimed that they owed their charisma originally to a *bariyaqi* ancestor in their family line, and to their personal experience in actual practice. The problem of the

*bariyaqi* initiated by a shaman deserves a separate discussion, but I will limit my reflections to *bariyaqi* not initiated by a shaman, in particular to Y *bariyaqi* and the healing she performed before my eyes. The main question that arose for me was: Why had Y *bariyaqi* and the people who called for her help been confident that she could heal a human patient by using the inner organs of a sheep? In order to find a suitable answer, I will consider her action within the larger context of Mongol folk medicine, although I am aware that the limits of my knowledge may not allow me to offer a completely satisfying answer.

The first time I was told that human sicknesses could be healed by applying the intestines of a sheep to the afflicted area the reason given was that in common understanding a sheep's inner organs were very much the same as those of humans with the exception that a sheep had two stomachs. If, therefore, the healthy organ of a sheep is brought into close contact with the same, but sick, organ of a human, the latter is enabled to recover.

The question that remains, however, is the question of why such a procedure should bring about the recovery of a human organ. The answer does not seem to be the intimate knowledge of the herders about the structure of their animals' body and the functions of its organs. If that knowledge alone were sufficient, there would be no need to call for the help of a specialist such as a *bariyaqi*. Furthermore, not every *bariyaqi* is taken to be qualified to perform a healing such as the one I have described. The usual method used by a *bariyaqi* is massage. The very term '*bariyaqi*' is said to mean, according to Shimamura, "someone who grasps the body" (Shimamura 2014:180; 519-521). While this is true for all three of the *bariyaqi* whose healing method I was given a chance to observe, only Y *bariyaqi* was credited with the gift to heal by using a sheep's body parts.

In order to find an answer to the question as to why an animal's, in this case a sheep's, organs can be used to cure a sickness in a human, I need to make a detour. In the mid-fifteenth century, the Ming Emperor Zhu Qiyu ordered the book *Yinshan Zhengyao*, a treatise on medical nutrition therapy, to be republished. This book had originally been published in 1330 by the emperor's head

physician, who was also responsible for the diet of the Yuan Emperor Wenzong. In a short text, the Ming Emperor contributed to the re-edition of this book, writing of two features common to everything that exists in the universe. First, he points out that to come into existence by the *qì* of heaven and earth is the condition common to humans and all things. Second, he says, humans are sustained by all other things of the universe (Hu 1993:2). This means that everything participates in the same energy, namely *qì*, and that humans are therefore obliged to treat all things with respect. Although the Emperor's admonition is contributed to a book on nutrition, his statement that everything in the universe participates in the same *qì* energy might offer a hint, towards understanding why the organs of a sheep can be used for the benefit of humans. For example, *Y bariyaqi* had explained the binding of the openings of the sheep's two kidneys with a thread by saying that it ensured that the kidneys' *qì* could not escape.

Almost a hundred years before the publication of *Yinshan Zhengyao*, William of Rubruck wrote of the hunger and thirst he and his companions had to suffer on their travel through sparsely inhabited regions of Inner Asia. They had only a little food during the days, but in the evenings they were given meat of a sheep and soup of that meat. This food revitalized them completely and prompted him to say that the soup seemed to him to be the healthiest and most nourishing thing (de Rubrouck 1985:137). Rubruck writes how this food helped him to recover from his fatigue and not that it would cure a sickness. The author of the *Yinshan Zhengyao*, however, writes in several entries how the cooked meat or intestines of a sheep could heal a variety of sicknesses. For example, a dish prepared from the liver, the kidneys, the heart, and lungs of a sheep is said to cure weak kidneys and defects of bone marrow (Hu 1993:106). It can, therefore, be said that the meat and intestines of a sheep were taken to have a highly appreciated value, not only as food, but also as a means to cure conditions of weakness and sickness in humans. That the meat of a sheep can have a healing effect on humans may be an idea born from long experience, but as mentioned earlier, people also say that such an effect can be expected, because the structure of a sheep's body and the functions of its organs are basically the same as those in a human

body. In his treatise, Hu lists the items that can be taken from various animals to be used for treating humans. I cite just one example from the section on 'sheep.' The example backs up the action of the *bariyaqi* introduced earlier because it says, "The five viscera of the sheep compensate for the five viscera of a human. The kidneys of a sheep compensate weak [human] kidneys, they increase the latters' essence" (Hu 1993:160). Certainly, familiarity with the body structure of their animals is a characteristic trait of adult herders, although not every adult male might command the same degree of such knowledge. However, such knowledge *per se* apparently does not qualify any herder to also be a healer using an animal's body parts for healing practice. Where, then, can we possibly find the basis for such a statement as the one made by Hu? Since he is concerned with preparing food for the emperor that is also a medicine, we might take a hint from a text on Tibetan medicine. The text is the *Rgyud bzhi* 'Four Treatises', a foundational text in Tibetan medicine. This text is also said to be one of the first books translated into the Mongol language (Meyer 2007:89) and to still have a decisive influence on Mongol medicine.

Although all those who want to practice Tibetan medicine have to first master this text by heart, it is difficult to understand. To make the text more approachable, the regent to the Fifth Dalai Lama, Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, wrote a commentary to it, the *Vaidūrya sngon po*, *Blue Beryl*, and added a great number of illustrations (Meyer 2007: 91). In these illustrations, he uses the image of a tree with its root, branches, and leaves. In one of them, where the tree represents various methods of treatment, it has several branches. Each branch ends in leaves carrying an image of the food that should be eaten in order to restore the balance of *qi*. On one of these leaves, we find the image of human arms and legs as a means for cure. But the commentary *Blue Beryl* explains that in the place of human flesh, the meat of sheep or bear is often used (Gyurme Dorje and Meyer 1992:23-24; 179-180). This means that, according to the commentary, human flesh has the same medical effect as the meat of sheep, so that the former can be replaced by the latter. Hu does not say that human flesh is replaced by animal meat, but he does say that a certain piece of an animal's body can be used in order to restore the

same area in the human body when it is afflicted by a sickness. This wisdom may perhaps be the reason why the contemporary *bariyaqi* uses parts of a sheep's meat to cure sickness in a human, and perhaps also why people generally believe that a sheep's viscera are close to those of humans. This kind of wisdom is, however, not reached by scientific experiments. Rather, it may be, as Jigent says, that the method to cure a sickness of the human viscera by the viscera of a sheep is based on the long tradition among the Mongols that takes the meat of the sheep to be the essence of 'red food', namely meat (1991:77). Such originally experiential knowledge may have gradually come under the influence of the systematic knowledge of professional Mongol medicine. During the treatment, the *bariyaqi* sometimes pointed to the characteristics of a particular body part as being of a 'hot' or 'cold' nature, and said that a balance between the two was the necessary condition for the patient's health condition to be restored. To that extent, her understanding of the reason why her curing was effective seemed to coincide with one of the basic explanations given in Mongol medicine. Yet, she apparently did not simply follow the stipulations of formal Mongol medicine.

In a Mongol text discussing the curing methods of the Mongol physician Yjinge, there is a description of the method to cure by using body parts of sheep. The method described is, even in the details, the same as the one Y *bariyaqi* used (Uljidelger et al. 2005:84-89). However, Uljidelger, one of the text's editors, writes in an unpublished text that for such treatment the heart, lungs, and liver are used, yet they should be used while they are still hot (Ulji n.d.). Y *bariyaqi*, in her treatment, differed from this statement, because she first put the still-hot kidneys and spleen in water to cool them before she applied them to the patient. Perhaps, it would be going too far, if this seemingly minor difference were given much attention. But a statement offered by Y *bariyaqi* at the time she applied the sheep's spinal cord to the boy's back suggests otherwise. At that moment, she first insisted that it was vital for the spinal cord to be raw and not damaged in any way. But then she added that in a case where such a spinal cord was not available, a red thread could be used instead. And she further said that this was her own idea, an idea she had found to be applicable and successful through experience. Although we may

accept that in both of the cases mentioned basic conceptions of formal Mongol medicine are adhered to, we also notice that the *bariyaqi* may not feel compelled to follow them minutely, but may rather prefer to make use of knowledge acquired not by formal study and experiment but by practical experience.

Y *bariyaqi* once told me in an interview that for some time she used to study with a book, but then she gave it away and relies now only on her experience and intuition. However, the ultimate source of her ability, she claims, is an ancestor who had been a well-known *bariyaqi* in his time and whose ability she has inherited. Because her ability is a gift she says that, therefore, she is not to ask to be paid for her services. This does not mean that grateful clients do not offer some sort of remuneration, be it money, food, or help in her household. For example, when we were about to board the car that would bring us back after the treatment of the boy, she was given a hind leg of the slaughtered sheep, but this was done in such an unobtrusive way that the action could hardly be noticed by the bystanders.

To conclude, I am inclined to accept the *bariyaqi*'s statement that what they do is a profession and a technique, although of a special nature, because it is a gift not everyone has. This special nature does not exclude the possibility that they control their experience and learn from it, so as to develop its effectiveness over time. Although they accept their ability as an ancestor's gift, they do not rely on the assistance of some spirit being for their efficacy. In fact, all three of the *bariyaqi* who I had the privilege to observe in action insisted emphatically that, unlike the shamans, they do not rely on the help of any spirit being. They emphasized that their ability to act as they do is initially due to an ancestor in their family, but is also an ability that they developed by closely observing and reflecting on their experience in practice. Therefore, their curing methods do not bind the *bariyaqi* to a fixed scheme. They can be quite flexible and responsive to a given situation, a characteristic that may have been generated by experiences accumulated over a considerably long period of time.

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## NON-ENGLISH TERMS

Ming 明

qì 氣

*Rgyud bzhi* རྒྱུད་བཞི

Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho སངས་རྒྱས་རྒྱ་མཚོ་

Wenzong 文宗

*Yinshan Zhengyao* 飲膳正要

Yuan 元

Zhu Qiyu 朱祁鈺